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Analysis

Research

Unknown Belarus

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Siarhei Kavalenka during his trial in Vitsebsk. On 24 February, Kavalenka was sentenced to two years and one month in prison for alleged parole violations. He had been originally sentenced in January 2010 to three years of "limited freedom" for "illegally displaying the banned Belarusian national flag" in a public place. Photo by Belapan.com

Main News

Last week European Parliament President Martin Schulz met in Strasbourg with Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle to discuss among other issues the situation in Belarus. President Schulz expressed his deepest concern over a prolonged hunger strike by jailed opposition activist Siarhei Kavalenka in Vitsebsk. Schulz urged the Belarusian authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally and provide Mr Kavalenka with all necessary medical assistance. The European Parliament President repeated his call to free and rehabilitate all remaining political prisoners. He also repeated his personal appeal to President Lukashenka to pardon Uladzislau Kavaliou and Dzmitry Kanavalau, who are on death row after the Belarus Supreme Court upheld their sentence. Finally, President Schulz encouraged the Belarusian authorities to respond positively to the EU offer of visa facilitation for its citizens.

Gunnar Wiegand, the Director for Russia, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia, Regional Cooperation and OSCE in the European External Action Service (EEAS) visited Belarus on 8-10 February. The purpose of his visit was to start preparing the dialogue aimed at the economic, political, and social modernisation of Belarus. While in Minsk, Wiegand held meetings with representatives of civil society and the political opposition, families of political prisoners, diplomatic community, and governmental officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and President's Administration. During the meeting with representatives of the Belarusian political opposition, Wiegand said it was possible that some political prisoners would be released in the near future. Meanwhile, Germany's Human Rights Commissioner Markus Loening who was going to hand President Lukashenka a letter from Germany's Foreign Minister calling for a "humanitarian solution" to individual cases, was denied an entry visa.

Belarus President Aliaksandr Lukashenka confirmed an agreement between Belarus and Russia to jointly protect the Union State's external air border and to form a single regional air defence system. The agreement was signed by the Russian and Belarusian defence ministers back in 2009. The agreement will create a joint force consisting of five Russian and Belarusian air force squadrons, and 10 missile batteries and radar facilities.
Both Russia and Belarus are staunch opponents of American plans to station a missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. Russian defence officials have frequently raised the possibility of stationing anti-missile systems in Belarus to counter the US shield.
The post of commander of the joint regional air defence system will be filled after the agreement takes effect.

The International Monetary Fund will no longer have a resident representative in Belarus. The current envoy, Ms. Natalia Kaliadzina will conclude her term, which started in 2009, and for the first time since the country joined the IMF in 1992, her role will not be replaced. In the meantime the IMF will keep the Minsk office open "with local staff." The IMF staff will continue supporting the authorities' efforts in macroeconomic stabilisation and structural reforms. The IMF will remain engaged with Belarus in the context of six-monthly post-programme monitoring and annual surveillance missions. Belarus is still seeking fresh IMF loans to refinance debt from the previous IMF programme, which starts falling due this year. Belarus must repay about $3.6 billion to the Fund during 2012-2014.

The first sale of Belarusian enterprises in the new privatisation plan will start in the summer of 2012. The plan includes 190 public companies, of which, 83 have been transferred from the 2011 plan. The State Property Committee of Belarus expects to gain $2.5 billion of profits from the privatisation of state property in 2012. Privatisation of state property is one of the conditions of the EurAsEC anti-crisis fund for allocation of a $3 billion loan to Belarus. Belarus has improved its foreign trade performance through the three-fold ruble devaluation. However, the competitiveness of the economy with its energy-and import performance could be in jeopardy again unless additional measures are taken.

Editorial

The sixth issue of Belarus Headlines features a review of the most important political and social developments in Belarus and covers a debate by various experts on the current policies that the EU implements in respect to the country.

First pages of the bulletin are dedicated to recently unfolding discussion over existing EU policy towards Belarus and, in particular, the pro and contra arguments regarding restrictive measures in the form of visa ban list and targeted economic sanctions. Belarusian and international experts express their views on the current policies and debate possible recommendations that would potentially be more effective in reaching the goal of democratisation and transformation of Belarus.

In their article on the upcoming parliamentary election BISS academic director Alexei Pikulik and senior expert Dzianis Melyantsou discuss the (non)participation of the opposition in this campaign. They argue that a nationwide campaign by the latter with the use of legal instruments but conducted under the opposition's own initiative and with clearly defined objectives will be the only chance for the latter to struggle out of the "ghetto" where it finds itself for years.

The Belarusian nuclear programme is dangerous, says Siarhei Bohdan, author of the article on the decision by the Belarus' government to build a nuclear power plant using Russian money and Russian services. This project threatens Belarusians with catastrophic indebtedness and destruction of the country's environment for the profits of a Russian corporation and some regime insiders.



Olga Stuzhinskaya



Tatiana Kouzina



Yaraslau Kryvoi

The research section of the Headlines offers material by BISS and the Agency for Policy Expertise showing that a new majority is being formed in Belarus who stay "in the middle", being represented neither by the incumbent government, nor by the opposition.

In addition, Yaraslau Kryvoi provides an overview of the most popular articles on the Belarus Digest web-site.

Finally, the Unknown Belarus section tells you about Vitsebsk, one of the largest Belarusian cities and a stronghold of Belarusian culture and tradition.

We hope you will enjoy reading this issue of the Belarus Headlines and, as always, we would very much appreciate your feedback.

Co-editors:
Olga Stuzhinskaya, director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus
Tatiana Kouzina, executive director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies
Yaraslau Kryvoi, editor-in-chief of Belarus Digest

EU and Belarus

EU Policy towards Belarus: Is There Need for Change?

By ODB, BISS



On 18 February, the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a round table on EU-Belarus relations in Minsk that brought together representatives of Belarusian expert community, civil society, and human rights organisations. The discussion focused on the impact the EU sanctions towards Belarusian officials has on these relations. In addition, the round-table participants discussed possible strategies of interaction between Brussels and Minsk.

Some participants of the event believe that the EU and the US should concentrate on supporting Belarusian society as a whole, rather than some individual groups within it. With time, this approach could create a basis for change in the country, including political change. Such strategy would be relevant, they believe, due to the absence in Belarus of a considerable political alternative on which could bring change and political transformation about.

The participants of the round-table agreed that the mechanism through which EU visa sanctions are imposed (such as adding new names of Belarusian officials to whom restrictions can apply) is lacking transparency and clearly defined criteria.
More information in Russian is available on the BISS web-site

The ODB has approached some international and Belarusian experts posing the following questions and asking for comments on the existing EU-Policy towards Belarus:

1. Do you think that current EU policy towards Belarus is effective? Is there a need for change? If so, what steps would you recommend?

2. Given that the European Union is not considering the introduction of fully-fledged economic sanctions against Belarus, with the intention of applying pressure on the authorities, do you think the EU should continue to extend the visa ban list and introduce targeted economic sanctions against some Belarusian companies? What real effect will such a policy have on the situation in Belarus?



Denis Melyantsou, Senior researcher with BISS

1. I consider the current EU policy towards Belarus ineffective, mainly because it is non-existent. The EU still has not worked out a concise and coherent strategy towards Belarus. It prefers reacting to actions of officials in Minsk, and does not offer consistent programmes that aim to achieve set goals. Although the EU sets a general goal - promoting democratisation and liberalisation of Belarus - its actions in this direction are inconsistent and chaotic.

The most important change needed is to work out a strategy of cooperation with the Belarusian government and with Belarusian society. The escalation of the conflict expressed through the deepening of isolation and the widening of sanctions needs to be interrupted. To assist transformation in Belarus, Brussels needs to think about making a solid investment in Belarus that would be attractive to the Belarusian elite and to citizens. There is a need to create a positive image of the EU in the eyes of Belarusian society. The easiest and most effective way to achieve this goal would be to cancel Schengen visas for Belarusians.

2. No. An extension of visa ban list would only deepen the alienation between the Belarusian government and Brussels, which in turn would encourage further strengthening of the dependency of Belarus on Russia. While Minsk is not making concessions and fully-fledged EU sanctions are not possible, a good message to Belarusian officials would be an alteration of the “black list” (excluding people who did not directly take part in repressions and who were not proven guilty) and the formulation of concise and coherent criteria for creating the visa ban list.

The effect of such a policy could be the termination of the escalation of the conflict and a gradual return to a course of normalisation of political relations. On the one hand, the alteration of the visa ban list would facilitate understanding by officials of their personal responsibility for their actions (one can be added to the list for specific actions, and can be excluded from the list if one does not take part in repressions). On the other hand, it would be a message to the country's government that the EU is prepared to exit from conflict and is waiting for actions from Minsk in response.

EU-Belarus



Giselle Bosse, Assistant Professor at the Political Science Department at Maastricht University

1. There is no clear-cut answer to this question. The EU's Belarus policy has certainly matured over the past decades, there has been more differentiation among the regions and countries which were part of the former Soviet Union, especially with the Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EU now has more staff working on Belarus and there is generally more interest in Belarus now compared to the late 90s and early 2000s.

Although the goal of the EU's Belarus policy has always been the democratisation of the country, the instruments deemed appropriate for achieving this goal have kept changing. The most visible change occurred with the launch of the EaP, which marked the peak of the EU's policy of 'pragmatic engagement' with Lukashenka.

The EU's return, after the 2010 presidential elections, to a policy of isolation of the regime and targeted sanctions is yet another U-turn in the policy. In the short term, the EU's policy of pragmatic engagement proved ineffective in the sense that it did not lead to a fairer presidential election in 2010, but that was perhaps an unrealistic goal. We can, however, say very little about the long-term effectiveness of the policy of engagement because it lasted less than two years.

The recent EU policy of 'critical engagement', which, in the words of EU officials is now more 'critical than engagement', has been applied for less than one year, and again it is too early to judge its impact. If the EU was to change its policy towards the Lukashenka government yet again, it would certainly run the risk of losing credibility. Whether one regards 'critical engagement' as the more effective approach or not, an EU that is changing its policies on an annual basis is likely to constitute the least effective option.

Another pillar of the EU's policy is the support for civil society. Here the EU has had severe difficulties in the past, because its financial assistance instruments were difficult to apply in a context in which NGOs often lack registration. There has also been a tendency among the EU's bureaucracy to favour the allocation of funding to large (EU based) organisations or foundations to implement the assistance for Belarusian civil society. Too few efforts have been taken to 'spread' EU assistance among the grassroots of a wider strata of Belarusian civil society, and particular its young people. Whether this will change following the introduction of the European Endowment for Democracy remains an open question, especially since the allocation of funding through the new mechanism is likely to be secretive.

2. It should not be forgotten that the European Commission in 2006 recommended that trade preferences to Belarus under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) be withdrawn, and the withdrawal has been in force since June 2007. Belarus is also subject to one of the tightest bilateral textile trade regimes amongst EU trade partners.

Nevertheless, EU-Belarus bilateral trade in goods has been growing steadily in the last five years and the EU is Belarus' second main trade partner with almost one third share in its overall trade (after Russia with almost one half). According to the Belarusian government the total trade turnover between the EU and Belarus in 2011 increased by 76% compared to 2010.

Against this background, sanctions like the visa-ban or targeted economic sanctions will most likely not make a significant impact, especially since several EU member states have made it clear that they oppose any further economic sanctions. However, these measures have above all a symbolic function which may very well have some impact. The Belarusian government is very keen on attracting more European foreign direct investment, but the image of the country as the 'last dictatorship in Europe' means that investors still perceive Belarus as a frontier market, despite the country receiving higher ratings for its investment climate in international ratings than Russia or Ukraine, for example.

At the same time, the broader the EU sets the criteria for its targeted sanctions, and the more individuals end up on the EU's visa-black list, the more important will it become for the EU to keep an overview of who is on the list, and why.

The EU has no proper mechanism in place to enforce sanctions or to monitor their implementation or impact. In other words, the more sanctions are imposed, the more difficult will it be to apply them consistently and to oversee their enforcement (see for example the cases of the journalist Aliaksei Mikhalchanka or the Minister of Internal Affairs Anatol Kuliashou who were issued visas to enter the EU despite being on the visa black-list).

The effectiveness of sanctions is highly contested in international relations and also in the EU. The Arab Revolutions, to name but one example, did not occur because of sanctions imposed by the international community.
A number of EU officials do believe that 'real change' can only come from within Belarus, but there are also many who believe that change in Belarus can be triggered or at least supported from the outside. The judgment on the effectiveness of the EU's current sanctions also very much depends on which of these two views one chooses to adopt. In all the discussion about the instruments or short term aims of EU policy, one should, however, not forget that its broader goals have by and large remained the same.

Anais Marin, Researcher with the Finnish Institute for International Relations (The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme) (Helsinki)



1. When questioning the efficiency of sanctions, one should first ask what the EU's coercive diplomacy towards Belarus is aiming at. Overall goals remain unclear: Brussels may have a policy stance, member states agreed on minimal "restrictive measures", but the EU obviously lacks a strategy. Yet sanctions could not openly aim at toppling Lukashenka or imposing regime change for the sake of fulfilling Mr Füle's vision of a European future for Belarus, not least as not all member states share it. Contrary to many other authoritarian countries, in Belarus there is no civil war, genocide or crime against humanity justifying outside intervention on humanitarian grounds. Such interference would not be legitimate.

Therefore, EU sanctions officially pursue only one goal: improving the situation with human rights and the rule of law in Belarus, with the first priority being the unconditional release and rehabilitation of political prisoners. Sanctions obviously failed to meet this objective so far – in my opinion because, given the regime's own survival strategies, the sanctions amounted to too little, too late… and were all too often bypassed by EU member states themselves.

Change is thus needed. The EU in its own ranks should seek to reach a consensus on a more ambitious policy, and implement it more coherently.

There is no room for idealism in relations with Minsk: dictatorships do not democratise, they only feign to, in order to prolong their own longevity. This is why I do not believe that the prospect of a normalisation of relations will ever push Lukashenka to voluntarily and genuinely democratise. Easing sanctions before the West's requests for an unconditional release are fulfilled would amount to trading political prisoners. Political prisoners are against such compromising, which would be not only amoral, but vain and counterproductive. Such a step would show Lukashenka (as well as other dictators around the world) that the EU could give up on its principles. This would further undermine the EU's reputation as a values-based global actor. If democracies refuse to deal with terrorists and hostage-takers, then they should not deal with Minsk either. Refusing to play Lukashenka's game means, for example, refraining from sending observers to monitor the predictably undemocratic elections he will stage next September.

2. We all know that Lukashenka is indifferent to naming and blaming – he even gets along fine with being ignored by the West. Hence the need to target his proxies, acolytes and other "bagmen", who are liable to feel the pressure more than he does, and could see a pragmatic advantage in complying. However, currently the EU is not offering them attractive enough rewards, especially in comparison to Russian ones.

In the ongoing debate regarding the visa ban list, I agree that the EU should take off the names of people who died, repented or quit their jobs – if any. This would indeed signal that the EU keeps a close eye on developments in Belarus, and might encourage defections. Conversely, in the absence of real improvements, and given that some political prisoners are on the threshold of death, the EU should keep on adding onto the visa ban list the names of the latest human rights offenders.

I belong to those who consider that sanctions have not been efficient *enough,* or, not efficient yet, and that this should prompt the EU to design a "smarter", more innovative and comprehensive policy on Belarus. Flexibility is needed, but it should definitely not result in lifting sanctions against

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millionaires who have been supplying hard currency to Lukashenka's slush funds for years.

If the goal pursued, besides the liberation of prisoners, is democratisation through regime change, then the retaliatory force of sanctions should on the contrary be increased. A targeted boycott of Belarusian goods could help meet this goal, even if at a cost: the EU would have to compensate for the losses in EU countries that depend on imports from Belarus. Generosity should also be shown towards Belarusians themselves – the most awaited step in this regard being to unilaterally waive Schengen visa fees for all *bona fide* travellers.

The full text can be found at the ODB web-site.



David Marples, Director, Distinguished University Professor, Department of History & Classics, University of Alberta

1. I think it is about as effective as it can be given the current preoccupation of the EU with the economic crisis and sharp differences of opinion among the membership regarding the correct policies to be adopted. I hope that the economic situation will gradually stabilise, in which case I would offer the following comments. The EU is not going to bring about regime change or democratisation in Belarus. It can encourage it by financing NGOs and the like, and it could take more decisive action by easing or lifting the Schengen visa payment required for Belarusian citizens (especially students). However, the difficulties of trying to do more than that through the Eastern Partnership were illustrated clearly at the Warsaw summit, when other EP members refused to sign a statement censuring Belarus. It might be easier and more beneficial to deal with neighbour countries bilaterally, as has been the case with Ukraine recently.

The nature of the Lukashenka regime should be familiar to all EU members, as well as the impracticality of trying to make deals with it on political prisoners, democratisation, or free elections. It is incomprehensible why EU members can condemn a regime like Qaddaffi's in Libya wholesale (even to the point of dropping bombs on Tripoli and helping to remove him from power), but still hold out hopes (in some quarters) of a dialogue with the authorities in Minsk. There is nothing to discuss. This engagement policy has failed repeatedly since 1999 and the regime has exploited olive branches from Europe and elsewhere with consistency and aplomb. Belarus does not have alternative centres of power, like Ukraine did in 2002-03 before the Orange Revolution. Differences between different sectors of the security services or the KGB are to some extent encouraged by the President, but they do not denote a potential weakness within the ruling structure. The latter is carefully controlled and harnessed. So I do not agree with the notion that one can make deals with people or factions in the government.

Instead, the EU should continue to encourage the opposition to continue its attempts at unity. There have been many disparaging remarks made about the opposition, and some of them are justified, but the fact remains that after almost 18 years of Lukashenka, recent repressions and arrests, and a constant barrage of attacks in the official media, the opposition is still capable of acquiring about 20-25% of the popular vote it got back in 1994—even higher in Minsk. Most residents in Belarus probably fall politically into the social democratic camp. In general they favour some state intervention in public life as well as some form of security net. They would not support wholesale privatisation, for example. But they would support viable economic reforms, particularly now that the economy is suffering and the regime is incapable of offering a realistic solution. Lamentably of the 2010 presidential candidates, only one recognised the need for an alternative economic plan, and he was the least effective in some other areas and has long since been compromised.

Moreover, Lukashenka in particular has exploited the quasi-myth of the failure of the short-term economic reforms of 1991-93 and the impoverishment that resulted. The advancement of a social contract and state-run economy appeared as a result to be a welcome alternative to many. But in 2012, I believe that bubble has burst, and most residents of Belarus would welcome a new, more far-sighted programme that could bring about reforms without completely eliminating the state role. It doesn't have to be shock therapy. This economic strategy, in my view, should take priority over all things and it is something on which the EU could work during its frequent engagements with opposition leaders. A clearly delineated economic programme that could be adopted by a unified opposition movement is the best hope for change in Belarus. Meanwhile, the EU should continue to treat Belarus as an important trading partner and open borders to those not on the travel ban list. That way it can be perceived as an alternative partner offering different solutions to Belarus' economic dilemmas. Russia doesn't have any and appears to seek only to exploit those problems.

2. I think the partial economic sanctions do not make much sense. They have had no appreciable impact on EU-Belarus trade over the past year. Full-fledged sanctions would be a more logical alternative but would require cooperation with Moscow to be effective. At present this seems far-fetched as an option because Russia perceives Belarus as part of its long-term plans for economic integration. The visa ban list on the other hand is important on symbolic grounds, to express strong disapproval of internal persecution and repressions. There is no doubt that the families of political prisoners appreciate it and those on the list resent it deeply, even though some manage to circumvent it. That is not the key matter. Essentially, the visa ban, for all its idiosyncrasies (duplication of names, inclusion of deceased people, etc) is a sign that the Europeans are not ignoring the plight of those arrested since 19 December 2012 and that they are deeply concerned about the plight of political prisoners, many of which have been tortured systematically since the time of their arrest. For that reason alone, I think the visa ban list is worthwhile and I have no problem with it being expanded. I am also in favour of including people who have carried out brutal actions in the past, including after the 2006 elections.

Alexander Adamyants, Director of the Belarusian Center for European Studies (Minsk)



1. There is no simple answer to this question, because first we need to define what an effect is, and then we need to know accurately whether this effect is at all achievable under current conditions. If we understand the effect as political liberalisation and democratic reforms, then the visa sanctions policy should be considered ineffective.

However, if we are talking about the extent of repressions in the country, then the visa sanctions have an undeniable impact. If we compare the local situation with that of many other countries with authoritarian regimes, like those in Central Asia, we see that Belarus is in a much better state regarding the scale of repressions against regime's political opponents and the civil society. Belarus has far fewer political prisoners, and at times the EU has even achieved the release of all political prisoners. In addition, the Belarusian regime's methods for suppressing the protests are far less cruel (for instance, there have been no cases of the use of firearms at demonstrations and street protests so far).

This does not mean, of course, that the EU's policy cannot be made more efficient. For instance, the EU could find more effective ways to support civil society, could be more flexible, competent and goal-oriented.

2. The question is not about whether to expand the list or not. The sanctions are not a goal in themselves; they are a tool, a way for the EU to unambiguously show its condemnation for the actions of the Belarusian authorities who deprive their citizens of civil and political liberties. By using symbolic sanctions, the EU clearly and explicitly states its opinion that would otherwise have remained unnoticed by the Belarusian ruling elite. The expansion of the sanctions happens and should happen proportionally to the actions that violate the rights and liberties of the people.

This policy has the effect of making the Belarusian authorities understand the demands of the EU. The governing class knows what it has to do, and what it has to stop doing, if it wants to improve relations with Europe.

It is also very important to understand that the effectiveness of sanctions on Belarus depends not so much on the policy of the EU, nor on the existence or lack of sanctions, but on how deeply the group of people that runs Belarus is interested in improving the relations with the EU. This interest is a function of the state of country's relations with Russia: the worse the relations with Russia are, the more Belarus is willing to start looking for compromise with Europe.

However, if the EU *unilaterally and unconditionally* suspends its sanctions, Belarusian leaders will consider it political weakness, which would mean the loss of their last lever to influence the Belarusian regime.

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Politics and Society

Elections or Boycott as Elements of the Opposition Zugzwang

Dzianis Melyantsou, Alexei Pikulik



Vital Rymasheuski, Anatol Liabedzka, Siarhei Kaliakin, Aliaksandr Milinkevich.
Photo by interpolit.net

Belarus' forthcoming parliamentary elections have sparked a debate over the format of the participation/non-participation of the opposition in the elections. Both the opponents and advocates of the election boycott are finding sufficient reasons to substantiate their positions. However, neither side is capable of breaking away from the electoral rules of the game, imposed by the authorities, and admitting that both the boycott and running for seats in the lower chamber are no-win scenarios for the opposition.

At the same time, a nationwide campaign by the opposition with the use of legal instruments offered under the framework of the elections, but conducted under its own initiative and with clearly defined objectives will be the only chance for the opposition to struggle out of the long-term opposition "ghetto". A campaign to collect signatures to call a national referendum on an issue that would mobilise Belarusian society could become such a nationwide effort for the opposition (these could be issues ranging from the elective office of the regional governors and heads of city administrations, to a limitation on the number of presidential terms). Only this policy can help the opposition avoid a losing-strategy and the "prisoner's dilemma" from game theory.

The opposition's dilemma

In the existing political context, the approach of the Belarusian opposition to the parliamentary elections slated for this autumn is a very hard dilemma: participation in the elections or the staging of a boycott.

Participation in the parliamentary elections holds both benefits and risks for democratic forces. The main advantages are the opportunity to communicate with voters legitimately, test "muscles" and structures and to train young party members, and to facilitate inflows of additional funds. The drawbacks of participation in an election campaign are manifested in the moral argument imbued by the existence of political prisoners. Other risks lie in legitimising the authorities and contributing to the illusion of a competitive electoral process, in addition to losing the "opposition electorate" and seeing the opposition defeated. Boycott supporters demonstrate the need to make the moral choice between the forces of "good" and "evil", saying that it would be unacceptable to participate amid repeated stealing of elections, repression and the existence of political prisoners.

There are serious counterarguments to a boycott. We believe that the main one is the **self-elimination of the opposition from the political process**. The idea of an "active boycott" can only be good as an idealistic construct that is capable of dealing with the dilemma of the collective action of the opposition and can serve as a perfect excuse. A boycott will come to banal idleness and passive observation. **A boycott is therefore a means to communicate within the opposition, not with society.** Second, **in the current political framework an election boycott is hardly feasible**. In order to persuade 30%-40% of voters not to go to polling stations, the main objective of the boycott, the opposition needs to enjoy massive support, which it clearly lacks now. Moreover, the opposition parties cannot agree on a single election-boycotting or participation campaign, whereas the unanimity of their approaches is an indispensable condition for efficient canvassing. Third, **non-participation of oppositionists in the election will make life easier for the authorities, who will not have to resort to ballot rigging**. This helps the regime deal with the problem of holding a model election campaign to showcase it to the West. Fourth, **there is little need to prove to the population that the reality differs from the pictures broadcast by the regime**, another major objective of the boycott.

So, the boycott of the elections and engagement of the opposition parties both appear to put the opposition in zugzwang in chess terms: any move weakens its position. The boycott adds to the marginalisation of the opposition, whereas the involvement in the elections legitimises the election campaign and further weakens the opposition, leading to another defeat and post-election depression.

The authorities' dilemma

The Belarusian authorities have a dilemma of their own to deal with: the choice between a possible, albeit currently unnecessary, good-will gesture meant for the West (a liberal campaign, although with a predictable result) and keeping the political freeze and total control of the situation.

A liberal campaign similar to that conducted in 2008 might help partially restore the balance in Belarus' foreign policy, the more so because the relationship with Russia may regress after the March 2012 presidential election in that country. This is connected to the inevitable pressure of the integration projects. On the other hand, "loosening the grip" too much when the economic situation might further deteriorate can have unpredictable consequences, especially during the elections.

One should not think that everything is predetermined – the hegemony of the regime calls for an active adjustment of institutions, and changes may be sudden and inconspicuous. Properly speaking, the regime and the opposition are playing a complex prisoner's dilemma. However, the authorities are trying to make the opposition play an internal game of participation=betrayal vs. boycott=stupidity.

Neither the elections nor the boycott

In our opinion, to deal with this zugzwang situation, the opposition needs to revise the objectives of its activity and break away from the scenario imposed by the regime.

First, it is important to **abandon the election discourse**. The opposition cannot influence the rules of the game, therefore, it should give up the term "election" at all, when speaking about the 2012 campaign, in order not to mislead themselves, their supporters and the population.

Second, it can and it must use the legal possibility to communicate with the population within the official election campaign. This communication should not take the form of election agitation but should be done **in the framework of a nationwide outreach campaign of the opposition, which is connected neither thematically nor terminologically with the parliamentary elections.**

Third, in the scope of this campaign, the opposition should set itself **clear and specific objectives and targets** that are **realistic and public.**

Fourth, the nationwide campaign of the opposition should finally let go of its traditional set of accusations of the regime and instead **focus on bringing an alternative vision of the country's development home to the population**, a vision that is understood by the voter and shared by all opposition entities engaged in the campaign. **The real objectives for the opposition must be a) to search for support among 60% of the population** who according to recent polls trust neither the authorities nor the opposition, **and b) to preserve and strengthen party structures**. Winning over at least a quarter of this non-aligned 60% would alone be a true achievement.

However, this scenario envisages certain **preconditions** for the campaign to achieve positive results:

1. The opposition players should join their efforts and appear before the population as a united force.

2. The opposition should set forth a common political and economic platform, ideally a single Belarus development strategy that all the participants in the campaign should share.

3. When embarking on this campaign, the opposition should enlist the support of civil society and independent media.

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Politics and Society

Who is Endangered by Belarus' Nuclear Programme?

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin



The banner says: NPP in Astraviec. No, thank you! Photo by atom.by

Belarus must transfer its highly enriched uranium out of the country or risks losing US support for its plans to build a nuclear power plant, warned US Assistant Secretary of State Philip H. Gordon in January. According to Gordon, Belarusian uranium is “a huge proliferation concern” to the United States. Meanwhile, the Belarusian government has continued to develop and even expand its nuclear programme.

Belarus' Soviet-era uranium stocks are well-guarded and there is little danger of their theft. Nevertheless, in December 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynau agreed that Minsk would give up its entire stockpile – 220 kilos – of enriched uranium by the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit. Instead, the US publicly declared its support for the nuclear power plant in Belarus. Then, in August when the US imposed economic sanctions on Belarus, Minsk said it would suspend the deal.

No wonder then, that Mr. Gordon again denied any possibility of helping Belarus build the nuclear installation. The US saw no future in relations with Belarus, concluded he. Moreover, Washington has, at the moment, minimal leverage over the Belarusian regime, and it is clear that the US can do next to nothing about the Belarusian nuclear programme, which is controlled by Russia. The country has the right to develop a nuclear industry, admitted an American official to the apparent disappointment of his interviewer from the Lithuanian Delfi news portal.

Scramble For The German Energy Market?

Meanwhile, in November, the director of the Nuclear Energy Department Mikalaj Hrusha unexpectedly began to talk about the need to enlarge Belarus' atomic energy programme. According to the Belarusian authorities, the first Belarusian nuclear power plant may have four rather than two reactors.

Until recently, the government was planning to install two Russian-designed and built reactors with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts each. The current plan is to increase the capacity of the Belarusian energy system to 8,000 megawatts. However, it appears that the authorities will fail to achieve one of the main objectives of the project: energy independence. On the contrary, the nuclear plant may make Belarus even more dependent upon Russia.

Belarus plans to build its nuclear plant 18 km from the town Astraviec in North Western Belarus on the border with Lithuania. The first reactor is expected to be put on line in 2017 and the second no later than 2018. The Russian corporation «Atomstroieksport» will construct the Belarusian plant. Officially, it is the “leading engineering company of the 'Rosatom' state corporation which builds nuclear energy sites”.

The project is, however, controversial for the Russian side because Minsk opposes the establishment of a joint enterprise to sell the produced energy. In addition, Russia is also planning to construct by 2016 a nuclear power plant in its Kaliningrad enclave. This may lead to competition on the regional energy market between Kaliningrad and Belarusian nuclear installations. Lithuania and Poland are also going to build their own nuclear power plants, and no wonder, they are not eager to see Belarus as a rival in selling energy. All these nations also hope to sell energy from their nuclear facilities to a burgeoning German energy market which will emerge as Berlin closes down all its nuclear power plants.

Since the very beginning Belarus has lacked the requisite funds to pay the costs of constructing its nuclear power plant. Minsk hoped for a Russian loan yet Moscow hesitated because the loan could have been spent on supporting the bankupt Belarusian economy, rather than the intended nuclear plant.

The issue has been solved at the highest level. When the Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin visited Minsk in March 2011 the countries signed two cooperation agreements to build the new power plant. One related to the “parallel work of energy systems” of both countries, the other dealt with construction of the nuclear power plant. The Belarusian parliament ratified the agreements on 20 October “in a closed session”, as the government was aware of the nuclear sensitivities of ordinary Belarusians who directly suffered from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The Belarusian regime is suppressing even the smallest protests against the new nuclear project, persecuting activists and banning any rallies and mass events about the problem.

The issue of financing the Belarusian nuclear power plant has finally been settled with a loan agreement signed on 25th November. The Russian government agreed to give Belarus a “state export loan” covering 90 per cent of the construction costs with 2 reactors but not more than USD 10 billion. The costs of its construction is estimated at USD 9bn, including 6bn to construct reactors and 3bn to build infrastructure.

After the publication of the loan agreement with Russia in January, it became clear that Moscow had additionally guaranteed its own positions in the deal by some specific provisions. So, if Belarus delays any payment for more than 180 days, it has to immediately pay back all the loan, its interest rates and loan service charges. If such 'consolidated indebtedness' emerges, the Russian side has the right to suspend the loan unilaterally. It means that Belarus – with its permanent lack of money – can very easily loose its nuclear installation, or money, or both to Russia.

A Completely Russian Power Plant?

On 11 October, the «Atomstroieksport» signed an agreement to construct the first and second reactors in Astraviec. It is unclear how all these documents can be amended because clearly Belarus needs more money to double the capacity of its nuclear industry. Belarusian officials emphasised that to add two more reactors would presumably be cheaper than to construct the initial two, as basic infrastructure will already be in place. Nevertheless, today the government does not even have the money to cover the current needs of the country and cannot afford additional spending on a nuclear project unilaterally.

Some media and NGOs raised environmental concerns about the Astraviec power plant, although some of them might be linked to the economic and political interests of the neighbouring nations, particularly Lithuania. The river Vilia flowing through the Lithuanian capital has been chosen as a water source for the new nuclear site. That could potentially threaten regional environmental security. Yet at the same time, the Lithuanian government itself is going to build a new nuclear power plant on the Belarusian border in Visaginas which undermines the sincerity of its concerns for the environment in the region. Meanwhile, on 20 October 2011 the Belarusian deputy minister of energy said that the IAEA and European Commission had no objections concerning the location of the nuclear facility.

According to the reports of the BelaPAN news agency, some work has already begun on the Astraviec site. The actual launch of full-scale construction depended on a final agreement with Russia on its financing. It means that construction initially planned to begin last autumn may only start in spring 2012.

Announcing the project of nuclear power plant construction, the Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka talked about energy independence – meaning, of course, independence from Russian gas and oil. Since 2007 the Belarusian government even toyed with the idea of giving the nuclear power plant contract to non-Russian corporations - US, Japanese, French or German. Yet it had no money to pay for it, and the result was both sad and ironic. The Belarusian regime managed to get money only from Moscow.

Now, the whole enterprise will be run by the Russians. The Russians will design and construct the plant for Russian money. The future Belarusian nuclear industry most probably will have to work under the guidance of Russian technical specialists. In addition, Russia will supply fuel and take back the spent nuclear material. The plant is likely to become part of an enterprise selling energy in the region and returning profits to Russia to pay the loan. Whether Belarus will gain any real benefits from the project, aside from the illusion of technical advancement and one more dangerous site, is likely a question without a positive answer. And that is in the best case scenario – if Belarus manages to bear the entire financial burden. Otherwise the plant may become simply Russian property.

The Belarusian nuclear programme is dangerous. It does not threaten the world with its uranium – it is controlled by the IAEA. Nor with its not yet constructed nuclear power plant on the Lithuanian border – it will be just one more typical Russian-built site like dozens already existing or under construction in the region. It threatens the Belarusians with catastrophic indebtedness and destruction of the environment of the country for the profits of a Russian corporation and some regime insiders.

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Research

In this section the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Agency for Policy Expertise present a digest of their new studies, publications and expert opinions on the most burning issues of political, economic, and social life in Belarus.

POLLING MEMO: Occupy the Middle

By BISS, Minsk



Key Conclusions

The latest data provided by the Independent Institute for Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in December 2011 completed the picture of Belarus in 2011. The year started with the post-election crackdown and repressions against politically active citizens, continued with the terrorist attack in the Minsk metro, and concluded with a broad financial and economic crisis, bringing about a complete change of mood in Belarusian society compared with 2010.

In late 2011, 70% of respondents thought it was important to have changes in Belarus (less than 1/5 of respondents felt it was important to maintain the current state of affairs) and 2/3 of respondents said Belarus needs market-oriented reforms. In December 2011, 58% of respondents said things in Belarus were moving in the "wrong direction", while "right direction" answers dropped from last year's 54% to 26% this year. Compared with late 2010, all those shifts correspond with the strong and prevailing opinion that Belarus was deeply in crisis in late 2011 (80%), while a clear majority (57%) said the worst is yet to come. Thus, the grounds for economic reforms are stronger than ever.
Starting from the first quarter of 2011, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has been facing a considerable loss of trust. Although in December he has recovered part of his electoral rating from its historical low (20.5% in September 2011), Lukashenka`s December 2011 rating (24.5%) still constitutes a major loss of support compared with December 2010 (51%). The recent minor recovery indicates some ability to improve ratings via macroeconomic stabilisation and attempts to fix the 'social contract' that got shattered by the economic crisis.

Thus, December's polling results support the trend of the year – the formation of a new majority of Belarusians politically staying "in the middle", being represented neither by the incumbent, nor by the opposition. The opposition is highly unlikely to occupy the middle ground. Firstly, the opposition is being pushed into the 'ghetto' by the repressive state apparatus. Secondly, the issue of political prisoners paralyses opposition activity: they cannot move forward without dropping the issue of political prisoners, nor do they have significant resources to help free their colleagues who remain in prison. At the same time a new "alternative" candidate could beat Lukashenka with 47% support. As Belarusians think the crisis will persist in 2012, either Lukashenka will have to move towards the political center with the help of new political tools, or he will continue using repression to keep the opposition in their ghetto, and keep the political middle ground unoccupied.

Detailed Findings
In the last 12 months, Belarusian society has become disillusioned with the ability of Lukashenka and the regime to solve problems. In late 2011 it became clear that without significant changes on the side of the government (or, to a lesser extent but still valid, the opposition) this major shift in mood by Belarusian society is unlikely to be reversed.

This can be concluded not only based on the "isolated" data considering Lukashenka's halved electoral rating – 24,5% in December 2011 compared with 51% in December 2010 (according to IISEPS). It should also be mentioned that 1/5 of those respondents who said in December 2010 they had voted for Lukashenka, a year later even denied this. In late 2011, the majority of respondents (52%) said Lukashenka does not understand the problems and distress of people like them (less than one third - 31% - said he does not understand); and almost 2/3 of respondents assumed Lukashenka lost his electoral rating compared to that in presidential elections in December 2010. All this data could indicate an increasing psychological "awakening" (collective consciousness) of the majority convinced that Lukashenka's supporters (and voters) became a real – and clear – minority. (Compare with the data from a year ago when a majority of voters, even some of those who did not vote for Lukashenka thought that he had won a majority.)

The latest polling data again proves that the Belarusian majority rejects a "revolution" (and also mass protest as a tool for bringing about changes). However, the demand for significant changes seemed huge in late 2011 and the readiness for achieving changes by democratic procedures (elections) became more relevant.

In December 2010, after the elections and the consecutive crackdown, still a majority (54%) said things in Belarus were moving in the "right direction". Compare this with the mere 26% in December 2011. At the same time, just one third - 33% - said things in Belarus were moving in the "wrong direction" (December 2010) – and compare this to the 58% that indicated a "wrong direction" in December 2011.
A year ago 50% said that maintaining the current state of affairs in Belarus (just 38% for change). A year later, in late 2011, 70% of respondents said it was important to have changes in Belarus (less than 1/5 of respondents felt it is important to maintain the current state of affairs). In addition, 2/3 of respondents said Belarus needs market-oriented reforms. All those shifts correspond with the prevailing opinion that Belarus in late 2011 got stuck in a crisis (80%) and 57% said the worst is yet to come.

Although in December 2011 a majority of respondents (54%) still did not believe in the prospect of significant change in Belarus in the next five years (deeming such change "unlikely" or even "impossible"), and half of respondents (50%) did not believe things would be better if Lukashenka left (31% believe this), 47% said they were prepared to vote for an "alternative" presidential candidate (in the next elections). A further 33% stated they would be prepared to consider voting for such a candidate.

The considerable mood shifts within Belarusian society in the last 12 months did not affect geopolitical preferences in late 2011. If Belarusian citizens were able to choose (vote in a referendum), 41% would vote for integration with Russia, 39% for integration with the EU. These answers do not show significant changes compared with those from December 2010 (38% vs. 38%). To Belarusians, geopolitical issues matter much less than policymakers might think in both Brussels and in Moscow. However, one could see a slight decrease of those who said in December 2011 they would vote against integration with Russia (43%), which is 4% less than a year ago, but still comparable to the results of three years ago (and twice more than ten years ago).

Research

By Inna Bukshtynovich, Stockholm



Photo by Reuters

Common Economic Space and the WTO: Too Late To Argue?

The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) appears to be making progress: its economic foundation – 17 agreements on the Common Economic Space (CES) - has been established and its supranational organs have been formed. The prospects of this integration project, however, are not so evident according to Tatiana Manionak from the Agency of Policy Expertise.

While the CES and WTO do not contradict each other, particularly as the CES is built upon WTO principles, it is the different speeds of accession to the WTO by EurAsEC members – Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus – that will present a major problem in moving further. Russia plans on joining the WTO around August this year, and once it occurs, Belarus will have to harmonize its tariffs with Russia. Though not yet a member of the WTO, Belarus is required to lower the level of tariff protection from 10.7% to 8% for a number of goods in the next 7 years.

For example, according to official data Russia's reduction of import tariffs for tractors and combine harvesters by 5-10% will result in a fivefold increase in imports. This will mean an increased arrival of agricultural machinery by European and American brands across all segments of the Russian market, which will heavily impact big Belarusian producers such as MTZ (Minsk Tractor Works) and Homselmash (Gomselmash).

Realising that Belarus' interest in protecting its market could become a serious impediment to the CES, and to the ambitious integration project overall, the Kremlin has agreed to support Belarus in its early entry into the WTO. On December 19 the two countries signed a memorandum that emphasises the preferential nature of bilateral trade in goods and services, including in the framework of the Union State, CES and the CIS. However, it is the interstate agreements, signed by "troika" in 2011, and not the memorandum, that is a priority for the Customs Union. And here WTO norms become a part of the Union's legal system. That said, Belarus and Kazakhstan will have to accept the conditions bargained for by Russia in joining the WTO.

However not all of the officials in Belarus agree with this. Here the architecture of EurAsEC supposes the discussion of the most sensitive issues at the level of presidents. Tatiana Manionak concludes that until Belarus becomes a member of the WTO, which is not even a serious endeavor yet, "troika" is likely to get caught up in the harmonisation of problematic issues.

The full version of this article in Russian appeared on BISS website on January 31, 2012

How Will the Arrival of Foreign Companies in Belarus Impact Workers?

The transformation of the labour market will inevitably bring new forms of discrimination in labour relations as well as reduce the role and influence of trade unions in protecting workers' rights. Aleh Hrableuski, an analyst of the Agency of Policy Expertise, asks how the arrival of Russian capital, currently constituting 40 % of all foreign capital in Belarus, will impact labour relations.

Companies with foreign capital prefer the forms of employment that have temporary nature. "Precarious employment" includes temporary contracts, fixed-term employment agreements (contracts), turnkey contracts (contractor's agreement) and contracts on paid services.

Temporary contracts suppose employment for up two months or up to four months in the case of the substitution of an employee in absence. Common discriminatory aspects of such employment are work on state holidays and days off, without the consent of employees. Meanwhile the wage on these days is ordinary. The major issue with contracts is the inability to terminate the contract at the request of the employee. Turnkey contracts are the agreements regulated by civil law. That is, being outside labour relations, employees are deprived of such benefits and guarantees, including paid annual leave, minimal wage, requirements for the schedule of working hours and severance benefits. Contingent labour, managed by staffing agencies that "sell" workforce as goods, is the most discriminatory form of labour relations. This employment is outside collective agreements and thus, labour law making contingent workers a socially vulnerable category. The wage of contingent workers could be as much as 30% lower than the wage of permanent workers.

The survey of employees of Russian companies in Belarus conducted in December 2011 showed that temporary employment is a widespread practice. While only 6-8% of the workforce belongs to temporary employees in Western Europe, almost 100% of employees in Belarus are forced to work under precarious conditions. The arrival of foreign companies threatens to promote discriminatory temporary employment and not the Western standards of labour relations.

The full version of this article in Russian appeared on BISS website on January 25, 2011

Most Popular on Belarus Digest

By Yaraslau Kryvoi, London

Foreign Policy

BelarusDigest

Three Reasons Why Belarus Should Be A Part of the Bologna Process – The article explains why Belarus should be admitted to the Bologna process sooner rather than later. First, applying 'accession conditionality' (i.e. membership only after reforms) will simply produce no results. Second, keeping Belarus out because of its politicized education system will only have adverse effects. Third, the Bologna Process will open a new window of opportunities for Belarusian universities. As a result, the universities will produce better qualified graduates with foreign language skills and a higher degree of understanding of how democracy and the market economy function.

The Reverse Effect of EU Sanctions - A new engagement policy intended to foster Belarus-EU ties on all levels could be a better alternative. The EU needs to develop contacts with Belarusian civil servants and businessmen that have an appreciable influence over the situation in the country. At the same time, the EU should increase its support for civil society, reduce visa fees and make a large-scale expansion of employment, internship and education opportunities for Belarusians. Increased engagement would help more to release political prisoners than yet another round of sanctions.

Why Young Belarusians Go to Russia, Not Europe – The article analyses massive work migration of Belarusians to Russia. Thousands move to Russia to escape unemployment and low wages in Belarus. While Russia is waiting for Belarusian migrants, who benefit its economy with open hands, the European Union keeps its doors shut, maintaining the highest visa fees in the region for Belarusian citizens. To balance Russia's influence, the European Union should become more open and offer more education and work experience opportunities to Belarusian youth and its future elites if it wants to see Belarus democratic and pro-European in the future.

Belarus Needs an Enemy - The article looks at the anti-Western rhetoric of Minsk and Moscow, and urges it to develop non-confrontational foreign policy goals. As a small state, Belarus has to adjust to the greater powers around it, and the best solution is to spread the risk among several international actors rather than surrender its sovereignty to one of them. This means balancing ties with both the EU and Moscow, diversifying trade and reforming the economy, and avoiding entanglement.

Media in Belarus

Browsing Foreign Web Sites is Not A Crime in Belarus - The article looks at how quickly false information about Belarus can make its way to the mainstream media. Even reputable media such as the BBC spread incorrect information that Belarusians would be fined for visiting foreign web sites which turned out to be completely untruthful. The Western media sometimes prefers to quickly publish sensational stories about Belarus to attract more readers without checking the facts.

Broadcasting Democracy to Belarus – The articles gives an overview of Western-funded Belarusian exile broadcasting projects and points to their weaknesses. It suggests that the media in exile should improve their interaction with the Belarusian audience and to avoid living in a foreign bubble. It also urges exile media to seriously consider the newly available forms of Internet communication, including combining radio and video internet broadcasting.

Culture

EHU: Belarusian University In Exile or For Exile - The article discusses how to increase the effectiveness of the EHU for Belarus. It concludes that the EHU could conduct more serious research on current political and social topics and go beyond giving technical and foreign language skills to its students. The university could not only tolerate but actually encourage the use of the Belarusian language in teaching subjects beyond Belarusian history and culture. This could be coupled with creating incentives for graduates to return to work in Belarus.

Andrew Wilson on His Belarus Book and Lukashenka's Survival - Belarus Digest interviewed Andrew Wilson, the author of the recently published book "Belarus - The Last European Dictatorship". The interview touched upon the history of Belarus and then on its current political and economic system. It also highlighted interesting parallels between the Soviet leaders of Belarus and Lukashenka who were both successful in extracting economic rents from Moscow and suppressing political freedoms and the Belarusian national movement at home.

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Vitsebsk: The City of Dreams

By Olga Loginova, New York



Vitsebsk with the eyes of Napoleon Orda (XIX century)



Vitsebsk (nowadays). Photo by kurorttuapse.ru

The city of artists and cathedrals, sometimes referred to as the Paris of the East, and Toledo of the North, Vitsebsk is doomed to conquer the hearts and souls of its residents and guests. No other Belarusian city has seen so many Princes, Emperors and artists passing by than Vitsebsk. This is where Napoleon proclaimed the end of the 1812 Campaign; this is where church bells were punished for the wrongdoing of the citizens; this is the City that has become the stronghold of Belarusian culture and traditions.

To be honest, I am desperately in love with Vitsebsk. It just has it all for me – this is where I have spent outrageously merry hours with my colleagues and friends, this is where I enjoyed the best of jazz jamming and ballet performance, this where I have fallen in love multiple times, and ultimately this is where my husband comes from, which, as you can understand, adds a special appeal to the place.

Many hours I have spent mockingly arguing with my Vitsebsk relatives over which of the two cities, Minsk or Vitsebsk, bears the crown of Belarus' greatest city. And although undoubtedly Minsk remains the official capital, with all the accompanying privileges, nowhere can you get more fun and spirit, and history as in Vitsebsk, the artistic heart of Belarus.

But, no more idle words; let's start from the very beginning.

To begin with, it is important to mention that Vitsebsk residents are very proud that their hometown is considered to be the second oldest city in Belarus. According to the ancient manuscripts, the city of Vitsebsk was founded in the summer of 947 (or 974, nobody knows for sure) by the Great Kiev Princess Olga, on her way back from a victorious war campaign. As the story goes, Olga loved the view of the hills embracing the river Vitsba, and so she ordered a wooden castle be built on one of the hills. Vitsebsk was the name of the castle. Consequently Princess Olga ordered the construction of two stone cathedrals - St Michaels in the Upper Castle, and the Annunciation Church in the Lower Castle. Pleased with what she had accomplished, Olga blessed the town and left for Kiev.

The first official date, when Vitsebsk was mentioned in the historic manuscripts was the year 1021, when the Prince of Kiev Yaroslav the Wise was defeated by the Prince of Polatsk Brachyslau, and had to give him back the Vitsebsk Principality. Since then Vitsebsk became a stronghold of the Polatsk Principality. Later on, it became a unit of the Great Duchy of Lithuania.

Through its long history the city witnessed victories and defeats in equal measure. Many of its sights were burnt to ashes and later rebuilt only to be destroyed again. In 1410, the Vitsebsk army took part in the glorious Grunvald battle. In 1957, the city was granted the Mahdeburg Right. In 1708, during the Great Northern War, Vitsebsk was burned down by the Kazaks on the orders of Russian Tsar Peter the Great. Only in 1775 did Vitsebsk manage to erect a new City Hall, but just to console its wounded pride – three years before the city became part of the Russian Empire, thus losing its autonomy.

In 1917 the Governor's Palace of Vitsebsk was built to accommodate yet another history defining event - the first conference of the Russian Social-Democratic Party of Workers who declared the start of the Soviet rule in the city. This is when and where the Ghost of Communism, haunting Europe, acquired its flesh and blood.

In the 1920s there was yet another revolution, this time a peaceful one was brewing behind the walls of the Vitsebsk artists' workshops. The School of Vitsebsk Abstract Art has given the world the Black Square by Kazimir Malevich, and Mark Chagall's beautiful fantasies. Together with Yuri Pan, these brilliant artists make for a cluster of wonderful geniuses that the Vitsebsk land has been richly blessed with.

Like Florence is associated with the name of Michelangelo, and Paris with Rodin, Vitsebsk's lifeline is forever intertwined with that of Mark Chagall. The artist, Moesha Sigell was born here in 1887 into a lower-middle-class Jewish family. He received an outstanding education at the most prominent artistic school in the city, and at the age of 20 he left his home town to conquer the world with his breathtaking paintings. Although most of his life was spent abroad, Chagall never really abandoned Vitsebsk, recreating and fantasising about it in each and every one of his paintings. The museum of Mark Chagall on Pakrowskaya Street (located in the house where Chagall spent his early years), as well as Chagall's Art Center are perhaps the biggest attractions for genuine art lovers visiting Vitsebsk (Here is the link to the museum: http://www.chagall.vitebsk.by).

WWII did not spare Vitsebsk from any of the grievances the Belarusians had to endure. During the four years of Nazi occupation 20 thousand Jews were murdered in the Vitsebsk Ghetto, while thousands of people died fighting with the oppressors.

Unknown-Belarus

Vitsebsk: The City of Dreams

By Olga Loginova, New York



Front man of the Belarusian folk band *Troitsa* Ivan Kirchuk performing at *Vitsebsk Slaviansky Bazar.* Photo by: Belapan.com

But gradually the city's wounds healed and it became what it is now – vivacious and bursting with life, arts and romance.

Slaviansky Bazar

I know that Vitsebsk residents do not share my sentiments but I really think that those brilliant minds who invented *Slaviansky Bazar* - the International Arts Festival – deserve a Nobel Prize. Since 1992, once a year, in July, Vitsebsk will explode into a hilarious never ending carnival, that would last for over two weeks and leave the city exhausted and barely holding on (and this is exactly why the majority of Vitsebsk residents abhor the very idea of the approaching festival, fleeing from the city to the neighboring dachas and villages). And Still, *Slaviansky Bazar* is our Rio, it is our Mardi Gras – there is nothing like it in madness, cheerfulness and popularity. You name a star (mostly Eastern European), and you'll definitely find them wasted in a nearby bar surrounded by the not much more sober media sharks. Jazz, pop, classic, traditional crafts - it's all mixed up and blended into a never ending exultation. I've been there, I've done that. And honestly I loved every second.

Slaviansky Bazar, though, is not the only festival that takes place in the cultural capital of Belarus. Jazz festivals, dance festivals, theatre festivals and more topical festive events keep the fire burning here all year round.

There's never enough to say about Vitsebsk. You can never see enough of its beautiful streets, elegant cathedrals and blooming parks and squares. This is the City where history is still alive, and the spirits of the city's patrons welcome and protect you on your journey into one of the centres of Belarusian culture.

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In Fact

- July 28 1812 sitting in one of the ball rooms of the Governor's Palace, French Emperor **Napoleon Bonaparte** declared his War Campaign finished. He admitted that going further East would be suicide. Two days later he changed his mind and moved in the direction of Moscow. As we all know that was the beginning of his end.

- In 1623, Vitsebsk citizens revolted against Archbishop **Iasafat Kuncevitch** who tried to convert them to the new religion of Unionism (The Union Church). The rebels burned down his residence and killed the priest. The riot was brutally suppressed and all the church bells, that rang to summon the protesters, were broken and melted into one large bell in commemoration of the unlucky Archbishop.

- **Fiodar Mahnou** is one of several well-known Belarusians associated with Vitsebsk. As, the tallest man on Earth, he was born in 1872 in the village of Kascyuki, and grew to a height of 2.85 meters. His height and strength made him famous all around the world, including the U.S.

Belarus Headlines is a joint project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Digest and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. More information about these organisations can be found on their web pages.

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